

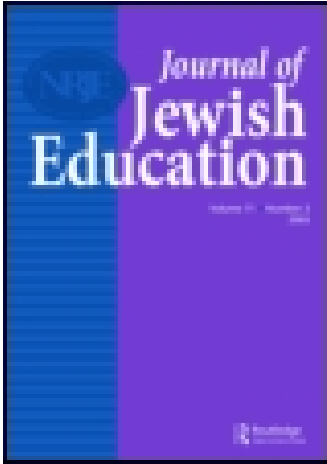
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THE PROBLEM OF READING IN THE JEWISH SCHOOL

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EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

THE PROBLEM OF READING IN THE JEWISH SCHOOL

BY WILLIAM CHOMSKY
Gratz College, Philadelphia

"It is generally conceded that reading is the most important of all subjects taught in the schools. It is fundamental; it is the open sesame to those treasures of the race stored away in books. It is also the most persistent of all the acquirements of school. From the earliest years of childhood to the last moments of recorded time, people read. And yet my observation is that our public schools are more concerned with learning the mechanics of reading than with the deeper importance of learning what to read. To the great hosts of grammar school graduates the realm of literature is practically an undiscovered country."¹

This scathing criticism leveled over twenty years ago against the public schools may have lost its sting since, in view of the many earnest efforts to introduce methods of teaching reading in consonance with the findings of recent scientific investigations and assiduous experimentations in the field. Substitute, however, in this statement the words "Jewish schools" for "public schools" and the criticism will still sound quite appropriate and perhaps even too mild. And yet scientific students of Jewish education not only steer clear of this problem but even fail to recognize its existence.²

May I state at this juncture that in

¹ John Harrington Cox, *Literature in the Common Schools*, p. 1.

² Cf. *Jewish Education*, No. 1, p. 67.

the present discussion I have no reference to "mechanical" or prayer-book reading, which can hardly be called reading at all in the modern sense of the word. Prayer-book reading is a distinct type of reading for which specific training is necessary and for which definite provision has to be made in the Jewish curriculum.³

Up until June, 1927, as many as 678 scientific studies of the specific phases of the psychology and pedagogy of reading are reported by W. C. Gray in his summaries of reading investigations in the United States, besides a large number of professional books dealing with the problem in its entirety. "It is a significant fact," Gray observes, "that the number of scientific studies of reading published during the year beginning July 1, 1926, is one-fifth the number published during the forty years preceding that date."⁴ That this keen interest in these studies is not limited to this country is well known to every student of the subject. In point of fact, the scientific study of reading was inaugurated in Germany and in France and was eagerly pursued in the universities of these countries, gaining

³ Cf. "The Story Method, etc.," *Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia Bull.* 15, chap. xii.

⁴ *Summaries* (July 1, 1926—June 30, 1927), pp. 16 f.

momentum as time went on, for nearly a half-century before the American students became interested in the subject. The fact that Jewish education cannot boast of a single scientific study on this most vital subject and that we still adhere with smug self-complacency to antiquated and unpedagogic methods in reading clearly demonstrates our backwardness in respect to genuine educational research and our failure to cope with basic pedagogic problems in a scientific manner.

Is reading less important an issue in the Jewish school than in the non-Jewish school? Is not the ultimate aim of teaching Hebrew to introduce the Jewish child into the storehouses of Jewish literature and to provide for him the key with which to unlock those original sources, in which the Jewish genius, Jewish life and experiences found the fullest and most lasting expression?

It is therefore the function of the Hebrew school not only to teach the child to read Hebrew intelligently, but primarily to develop a taste for good Hebrew books, and to create a permanent interest in reading Hebrew literature which will carry over beyond the bounds of the Hebrew school environment.

What have been our accomplishments thus far? What schools can boast of having approximated this aim? What proportion of our graduates, let alone those who drop out before graduation, is equipped to read and appreciate Hebrew books? How many of them experience any permanent desire to read Hebrew? and how many do read it after graduation? I am sure that a survey of the situation would reveal some alarmingly disheartening figures. The exceptions merely prove the rule and can be explained on

the principle of the "survival of the fittest."

What, then, may I ask, is the justification for spending so much time, effort, and money on teaching Hebrew? Is there anything of lasting value in covering several Hebrew school readers, most of which are scrappy in form and trivial in content; or even in getting a smattering of the Bible and Mishna, the interest in which terminates with the last examination? This is more than a mere rhetorical question. It demands an adequate answer from earnest students of Jewish education.

What has been amiss with our methods of teaching Hebrew? Why do our achievements fall so far short of their aims? The answer is clearly implicit in the aforementioned quotation from Professor Cox. We have not trained our pupils to read Hebrew properly. We have taught them to patter off a few Hebrew sentences. We have taught them to translate some Bible. But we have misunderstood the whole process of reading, regarding it merely as one involving the mechanical mastery of phonic elements rather than as a thought-getting procedure, and it was therefore wrongly assumed to be a problem of the first grade only. Consequently, our pupils acquire reading habits which are extremely distracting since they have to play on two instruments at the same time: They first attack the reading matter as combinations of sounds to be pronounced and then have to go back to interpret these symbols into thought-units. Thus, instead of having stimuli (reading matter) result immediately in an ideational response (awareness of the object, act, or idea), the first result is a mechanical response of pronunciation, which in its

turn stimulates the ideational response. This indirect and involved psychological process undoubtedly breeds poor mental habits, and it is responsible for the halting and choppy reading which we find even in some of our more advanced grades and for the poor achievements in reading which we pointed out previously. Teachers are doubtless acquainted with the fact that quite frequently children experience great difficulty in comprehending the sense of certain Hebrew selections in which they may understand every word separately; while the same children, properly trained, "get the thought" of selections in English, in which they may miss the meaning of a number of words.

Now what is, first of all, the physiological process of reading? Investigations and experiments on this subject during the past fifty years have revealed beyond any dispute the fact that the reader's eye does not pass consecutively, as is popularly conceived, from letter to letter or from sign to sign, but proceeds by a series of rapid, jerky movements, each of them occupying about one-fortieth of a second. The actual seeing or reading, therefore, does not take place during this quick movement, but during the "fixation pauses," that is, the time between one "jump" and the next, which occupies over 90 per cent of the reading time. Consequently, it takes just as much time to read a word or a phrase, depending on the degree of familiarity of the reader with the content, as it does to read a single letter or sign. Furthermore, experiments prove that accuracy of recognition increases with the increasing organization of the reading material. Sentences are grasped more quickly than words and the latter more quickly than individual

sounds. "We are satisfied in concluding, therefore, that accuracy of recognition is greatly facilitated by presenting words in meaningful situations and by concentrating attention on the content of what is read."⁵

It should therefore be the chief object of the teacher of reading to develop long eye sweeps and the ability to recognize large reading units at a single glance, thereby decreasing the number of fixation pauses per line. However, it is maintained by some⁶ that general education is not at all certain that the vision span can be increased. Now, there is very little in science that is absolutely certain, but we have to accept the opinions of authorities based on research and experimentation. Let me then refer again to W. C. Gray, one of the outstanding investigators in the field, who after reporting a number of studies "which present strong evidence in support of the view that even the most rapid readers seldom make use of the entire extent of the visual field that is available for seeing words," concludes that "one of the major problems confronting teachers of reading is to develop a wide span of recognition."⁷ Another famous investigator, John A. O'Brien, also reports a study of the effect on speed of reading which distinctly points to the fact that the enlargement of the span of recognition is primarily responsible for the increase in speed of reading.⁸ So far as I know, no recent authorities of prominence hold the contrary view. In general, the factors influencing the span and rate of recognition are: (a) the type of the

⁵ Gray, *Summaries of Reading Investigations* (1925), p. 67.

⁶ Cf. *Jewish Education*, No. 1, p. 67.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 74 f.

⁸ Cf. *Silent Reading*, pp. 232-69.

reading material and the degree of the reader's familiarity therewith; (b) the difficulty of the material; and (c) the motive for, or purpose of, reading. The size of the unit of recognition is thus determined primarily by the thought relationship existing between its parts. "Studies of word perception show clearly that the amount recognized per exposure was less when reading words than when reading phrases or paragraphs."⁹

It was in the light of the foregoing considerations that "The Story Method" as set forth in *Bulletin 15* published by the Associated Talmud Torahs has evolved. The general scheme is briefly this: Hebrew words, phrases, and sentences are presented in a story context, told in English. This story background occupies only a small proportion of the teaching time and merely serves to provide the connecting links in the Hebrew insertions; but it is replete with opportunities and natural situations for the use of Hebrew elements in various associations, thus motivating strongly the drill and the review. The Hebrew elements are not interspersed arbitrarily, but are intrinsic in the story, whose setting is a Palestinian or Hebrew-speaking environment. Consequently, when the Hebrew thought-unit, be it a word or a phrase or a sentence, is presented to the children on the blackboard as the visual equivalent or "picture" of what they heard and expressed in multiple situations and associations, they have no difficulty in reading it and recognizing it as a whole. The next step is, of course, to analyze the smaller units, the words and, somewhat later, also the sounds; but the latter constitute in the consciousness of the children merely the component parts of the

whole. Thus, to use the analogy of seeing a picture or a painting, the observer gets at first a total impression of, say, an Indian, Chinaman, a forest, etc., and only later the trained and analytic observer may proceed to analyze the component elements: the color of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the form of the leaves, the blending of colors, etc. Similarly, in attacking reading matter, after the reader is adequately familiarized with the nature of the visual symbols, the same procedure is followed. It is this principle which is operative in the methods of teaching reading in the public schools and which is, in my opinion, worthy and capable of adoption by the Jewish school.

Now, a number of criticisms are offered against this method, which may be summed up as follows:

1. Analogies from the public schools are untenable, because English is a highly unphonetic language; it is therefore difficult to learn the reading thereof by a phonic procedure. Hebrew, however, is a phonetic language and it is very easy to learn to read it.

2. As a corollary of the preceding, since Hebrew is a phonetic language, why not have the children master first the mechanics of reading which can be accomplished in a comparatively short time and then proceed to develop the ability to read for thought?

3. This method is based on an over-complicated procedure which is likely to baffle the Hebrew teacher.

4. This method may be feasible and useful in teaching the reading of the native language but cannot be employed in teaching the reading of a "foreign" language.

We shall now take these criticisms up

⁹ Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

in due order and investigate into their validity.

1. To resolve the whole problem of reading to a question of phonetics is, it seems to me, to miss the point at issue. The problem is much more basic; it involves the psychological rather than the physiological processes. It is the attack on reading matter as thought content, rather than as a combination of sounds, which gave rise to the movement of reading researches and attracted the wide attention of investigators. It is certainly inconceivable that reading-studies in Germany, where the movement originated, would be actuated by considerations of phonetic difficulties, since German is no less a phonetic language than Hebrew. Furthermore, accuracy of recognition is but one of the factors of the physiological process of reading, the others being: the span of recognition, speed of recognition, rhythmical swings, and return sweeps from the end of the line to the beginning of the next line (interfixation), each of these having special characteristics and requiring specific training.

2. To teach children the beginnings of reading with the view of training them in the habit of reading for comprehension after they have mastered the mechanics of reading is in direct violation of the psychological law of primacy. This law states that the first responses made to a given learning situation are bound to influence all succeeding responses. The habits formed at the initial stages in connection with a certain learning experience are most deeply stamped in and most difficult to eradicate. "First impressions last longest." It is therefore necessary to secure a correct start.

3. The method is not at all over-complicated for teachers, after a cer-

tain period of orientation. Alert-minded teachers are enthusiastic about this method, because it offers them a wide and varied scope of activities and numerous opportunities for initiative and creative work. May I add that the teaching act in the Jewish school suffers, in my judgment, from oversimplification and sameness. More varied and diversified procedure should be introduced into the classroom of the Jewish school to keep our teachers out of ruts and to secure better attention and interest on the part of the pupils. Furthermore, many of the suggested steps mentioned in the aforementioned *Bulletin* in connection with this method are not essential to the method; they are merely helpful aids which the teacher may discard at his discretion.

4. That it is possible to develop in children the ability to read within their vocabulary in the foreign language with the same facility as in the native language has been demonstrated by experiments reported by Gray,¹⁰ in which Bengali boys were taught to read English. To quote from Gray directly: "The results showed that a nine-year old Bengali boy should within his vocabulary read English with the same facility as an English child of the same age (and so on with the other ages). . . . This study merits the careful attention of all teachers in modern foreign language."

To be sure, it has not been possible as yet to devise an objective technique with which to gauge the results of our experiment. But we have good reason to believe that the conclusions reached by the foregoing studies will be corroborated by our experiment. I could quote many instances on which this optimistic view is founded. But I want to be cautious and

¹⁰ *Summaries* (1928), p. 42.

wait for more objective proof. May I say only impressionistically that even with the crude and inadequate materials with which our teachers still have to operate, some very promising results have been achieved. Teachers are unanimous in maintaining that never before have they witnessed pupils taking to their class work with such genuine joy and enthusiasm and going through difficult learning and drill situations with such an absorbing zeal and interest. It is exhilarating to watch these children listen with avid ears and gleaming eyes to the adventures of their hero for the "hundredth" time and

acting them out as often as they get the chance, using Hebrew through practically the entire performance even during the initial stages. This is at least symptomatic.

However, I do not wish to be dogmatic about this method and I do not want to offer it as a panacea. It probably has its shortcomings and it certainly can be improved upon. It is merely an attempt to approach the problem of reading from a scientific viewpoint. It is up to students of the subject to investigate further into the problem.

TEACHING OF HISTORY IN INTERMEDIATE GRADES OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

(AN EXPERIMENT IN SUPERVISED STUDY)

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When the laboratory method of teaching history¹ was recently introduced into the seventh grade of the Sunday schools of Chicago, it was found that most of the children did not possess enough background to follow the work intelligently, although it must be remarked that very little previous knowledge is needed for the purpose. Furthermore, it was found possible to reclassify almost all the children according to their public-school grades, without any consideration of the number of years previously spent in the Sunday school. Both of these facts show very clearly that the children learned very little, if anything, in the first six Sunday-school grades.

To improve this situation, both the

contents and the method of teaching were changed. (Better teachers were, unfortunately, not available at the time.) The first three grades had not as yet received much attention, and so their work cannot be discussed at this time. It is in the intermediate grades (Grades IV-VI) that the experiment was tried which is to be described herein:

Heretofore, children in those grades usually learned a mixture of unconnected history, Bible stories, and legends. This, undoubtedly, resulted in leaving some very erroneous as well as very hazy impressions of what Jewish life has been like up to the present. Since it is desirable as well as possible to teach true history in these grades,² it was decided

¹See J. S. Golub, "Some Experiments in the Jewish Sunday Schools of Chicago," in the *Jewish Education Magazine*, January, 1929.

²See Henry Johnson, *Teaching of History*; also Paul Klapper, *The Teaching of History*.